

Rescaling Urban Governance – Planning, Localism and Institutional Change

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Localism

- Decentralisation/localism/devolution has been a “global trend” (Rodriguez-Pose & Gill 2003).
- Three “distinct, albeit overlapping, forms of decentralising discourse” (Rodriguez-Pose & Sandall 2008, p. 56) have been used to justify this:
 - Identity: the discourse of minorities
 - Efficiency: the economic discourse
 - Good governance: the democratic discourse

The democratic discourse

- “The power of the discourse lies in the fact that it is self-evidently almost impossible to challenge the value of ‘good’ governance” (Rodriguez-Pose & Sandall 2008, p. 57)
- “who would be in favour of a system being *less* democratic?” (Lord et al. 2017)
- “The superficiality of this discourse, however, conceals much complexity” (Sturzaker & Gordon 2017, p. 1325)
- The 2010 onwards reforms to governance in England provide an excellent example of that complexity



England as a case study

- “it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government” (HM Government 2010a, p.7)
- “The Localism Bill... is the centrepiece of what this Government is trying to do to fundamentally shake up the balance of power in this country... Central government has kept local government on a tight leash, strangling the life out of councils in the belief that bureaucrats know best. By getting out of the way and letting councils and communities run their own affairs we can restore civic pride, democratic accountability and economic growth - and build a stronger, fairer Britain” (DCLG & Pickles 2010)



Yet...

- Central government grants to local authorities cut by 50% 2010-2018, possibly up to 77% by 2020
- More deprived local authorities seeing sharper reductions in their grants (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016)
- Localism argued to potentially generate greater 'efficiency' in public service delivery (DCLG, 2011; HM Government, 2010b)
- A 'smarter state' (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016) could ameliorate budget cuts

Subnational policy reform

- Regional Spatial Strategies abolished in 2010, so that “Communities will no longer have to endure the previous government's failed Soviet tractor style top-down planning targets” (DCLG 2010)
- No direct replacement – instead, “above” the regions were introduced several non-statutory “spatial imaginaries”, including the *Northern Powerhouse*, which would focus on spending on infrastructure, including electrification of rail lines
- Heavily associated with ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne

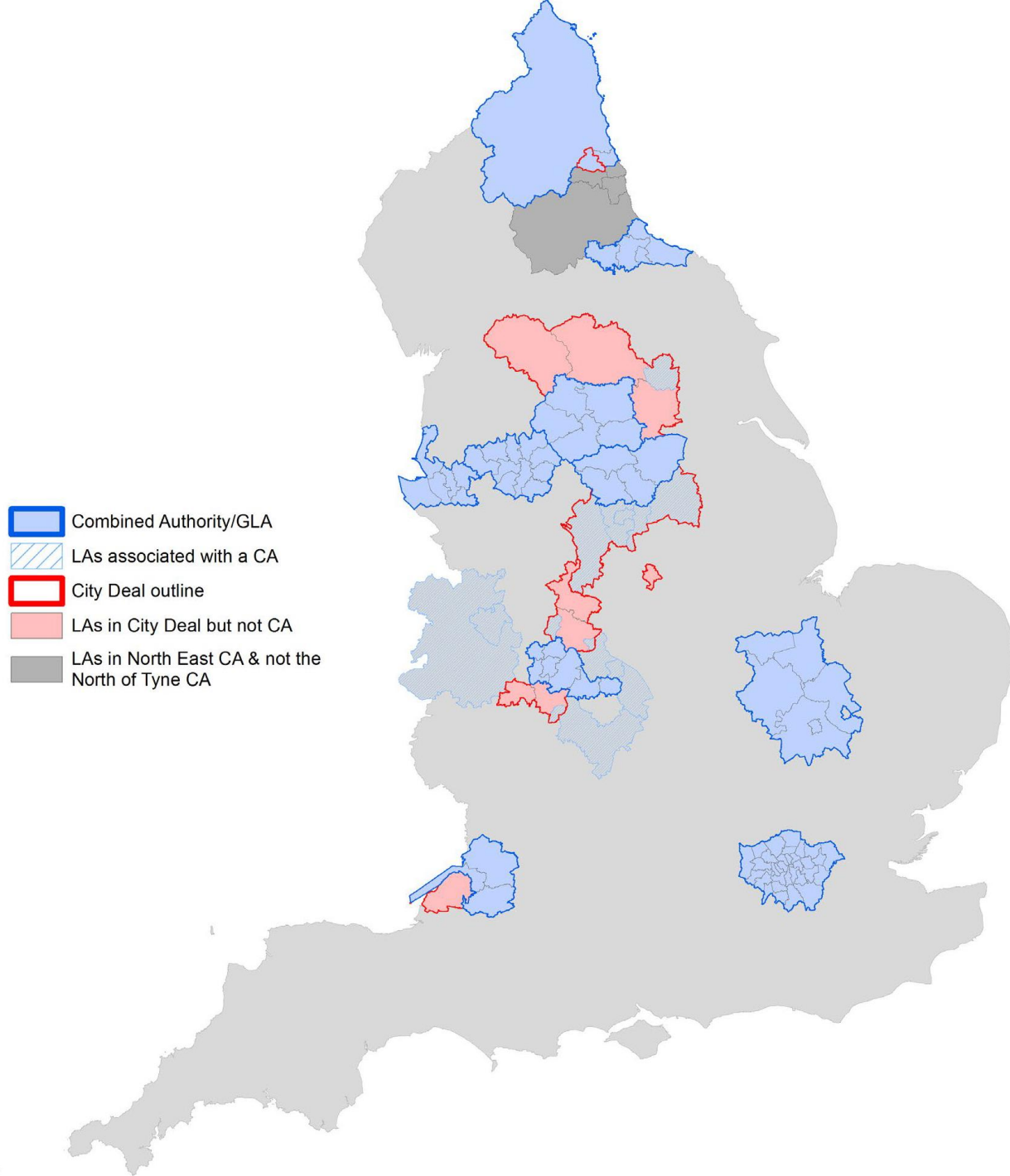
Subnational reality

- Lack of statutory underpinnings led to various competing Northern Powerhouse-type initiatives:
 - The Northern Powerhouse Partnership
 - The Great North Plan
 - Convention for the North
 - Making Places in the North
 - Transport for the North
- “When it is now crystal clear the government isn’t committed to delivering the step-change in rail investment in the North that we so desperately need [...] the Northern Powerhouse will remain a pipedream” (Anderson, 2018)



City-regional policy reform

- Local Enterprise Partnerships
- Local Police and Crime Commissioners
- Combined Authorities
- City-regional directly elected mayors
- City-region deals
- Combined authority spatial frameworks



Source:
Lupton et al.
2018, p. 59

City-regional reality

- City-regional devolution heavily features “deal-making founded upon territorial competition and negotiation” (O'Brien & Pike, 2015, p. 14)
- Devolved powers are contingent on accepting the imposition of new forms of governance, e.g. a directly-elected mayor.
- More coherent city-regions, e.g. Greater Manchester, are better able to exploit the opportunities available – though problems can still occur re competing priorities at different levels

Municipal policy reform/context

- City level directly elected mayors
- Introduction of “general power of competence”, to allow local authorities to do anything an individual can do
- Removal of limit on local authority borrowing against their stock of housing
- Cuts in grants for general purpose and planning/regeneration-specific funding of 50%+
- Population size of English local authorities ranges from 7,500 to 1.1 million; and population density from 24 to 13,700 people per square kilometre

Municipal reality

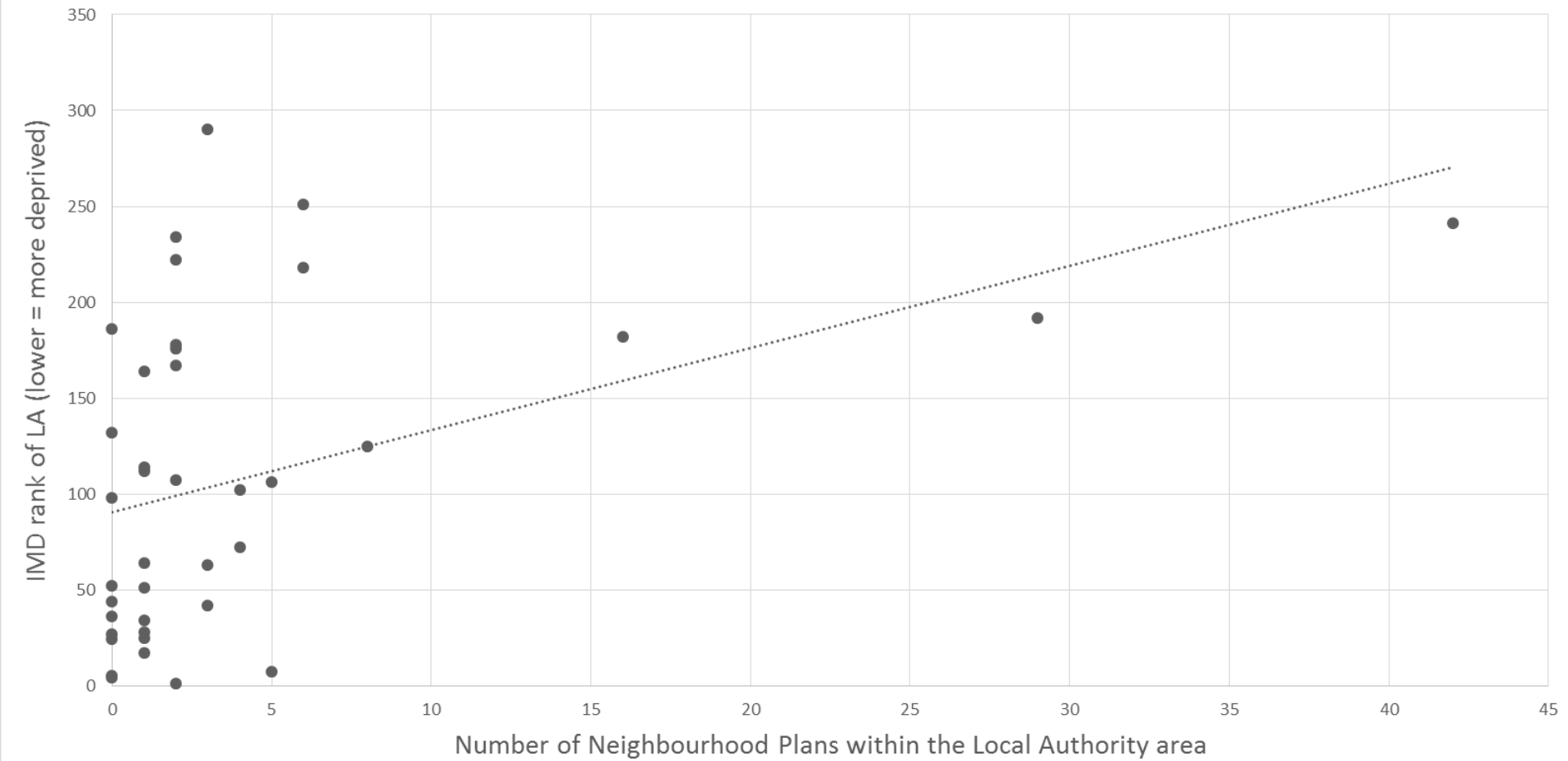
- Only two directly-elected city mayors – in Liverpool, we have the “spare mayor”
- Despite “general power of competence”, local authorities remain dependent upon parliamentary authority for everything that they do (Stanton, 2018)
- “Local government is also being ‘written out’ of services that were previously its core business” (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016, p. 367)
- Some municipalities (close to) declaring bankruptcy
- “Entrepreneurialism” increasingly common – including re housebuilding
- Municipal socialism?



Community policy reform

- Various community-level reforms through 2011 Localism Act:
 - Neighbourhood plans
 - Community Right to Bid
 - Community Right to Build
 - Community Right to Challenge (via referendums)
 - Need for referendums on council tax rises beyond a (centrally set) threshold

Community reality



Conclusions

- There are interactions and overlaps between the various levels of devolution in England – city-region vs, city; city vs. community...
- Brexit an enormous distraction nationally, loss of focus on localism and everything else
- “Austerity” a more significant driver of outcomes than any other area of policy, including localism
- Areas with more coherence better able to take advantage of powers – from city-regions to communities
- The poor getting poorer and more disenfranchised



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